



Burma

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The country has been ruled since 1962 by highly repressive, authoritarian military regimes. Since 1988, when the armed forces brutally suppressed massive pro-democracy demonstrations, a junta composed of senior military officers has ruled by decree, without a constitution or legislature. Most adherents of religions that are registered with the authorities generally are allowed to worship as they choose; however, the Government imposes restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abuses the right to freedom of religion.

There was no change in the limited respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In October 2004, the military intelligence apparatus that, as part of its responsibilities, covertly and overtly monitored religious activities in the country was disbanded; however, the Government continued to infiltrate and monitor the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. The Government systematically restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom, discouraged and prohibited minority religions from constructing new places of worship, and actively promoted Buddhism over other religions, particularly among members of the minority ethnic groups. Christian and Muslim groups continued to experience difficulties in obtaining permission to repair existing churches or build new ones in most regions. Anti-Muslim violence continued to occur, as did the monitoring of Muslims' activities. Restrictions also continued on worship countrywide of non-Buddhist minority groups. There were no reports of forced conversions of non-Buddhists or forced labor to build Buddhist pagodas.

There were flare-ups of Muslim-Buddhist violence during the period covered by this report. Persistent social tensions remained between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities, largely due to old British colonial and contemporary government preferences. Widespread prejudice continued to exist against citizens of South Asian origin, most of whom are Muslims.

The U.S. Government promoted religious freedom with all facets of society, including government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, and scholars, diplomats of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives offered support to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders and acted as a conduit for information exchange with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. Government has a wide array of economic sanctions in place against the country for its violations of human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 261,970 square miles, and its population is estimated to be 52 million. The majority of the population is Theravada Buddhist, although in practice popular Buddhism in the country includes veneration of many indigenous pre-Buddhist deities called "nats" and coexists with astrology, numerology, and fortune telling. Buddhist monks, including novices, number more than 400,000 and depend on the laity for their material needs, including clothing and daily donations of food. There is a much smaller number of Buddhist nuns. There are Christian minorities (mostly Catholics, as well as Baptists, Anglicans, and an array of other Protestant denominations), Muslims (mostly Sunni), Hindus, and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. According to official statistics, almost 90 percent of the population practices Buddhism, 4 percent practices Christianity, and 4 percent practices Islam. These statistics almost certainly underestimate the non-Buddhist proportion of the population. Muslim leaders claim that there are approximately 7 to 10 million Muslims in the country, which is about 14 to 20 percent of the population--although it is impossible to verify this number. There is a small Jewish community in Rangoon, and while there is a synagogue, there was neither a congregation nor a resident rabbi to conduct services.

The country is ethnically diverse, and there is some correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Burman ethnic group and among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon ethnic minorities of the eastern, western, and southern regions. Christianity is the dominant religion among the Kachin ethnic group of the northern region and also the Chin and Naga ethnic groups of the western region, some of whom also practice traditional indigenous religions. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups of the southern and eastern regions,

although many Karen and Karenni are Theravada Buddhists. In addition, some ethnic Indians are Catholics. Hinduism is practiced chiefly by the Indian population, which is concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region. Islam is practiced widely in Arakan State, where it is the dominant religion of the Rohingya minority, and in Irrawaddy Division. Islam is also practiced by Burmans, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis. The Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous religions are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the northern regions. Practices drawn from those indigenous religions persist widely in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The country has been ruled since 1962 by highly authoritarian military regimes. The current military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. Most adherents of religions that are registered with the authorities generally enjoy the right to worship as they choose; however, the Government has imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently has abused the right to religious freedom.

Since independence in 1948, many of the ethnic minority areas have been bases for armed resistance against the Government. Although the Government has negotiated cease-fire agreements with most armed ethnic groups since 1989, active Shan, Karen, and Karenni insurgencies continued during the period covered by this report. Peace talks continued intermittently between the Government and the leading Karen insurgent group, the Karen National Union (KNU). However, there was periodic fighting between the army and the KNU and multiple army attacks on Karen villages. Successive civilian and military governments have tended to view religious freedom in the context of whether it threatens national unity.

There is no official state religion; however, in practice the Government continued to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism. Since independence, successive governments, civilian and military, have supported and associated themselves conspicuously with Buddhism. The Ministry of Religious Affairs includes a powerful Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching).

Virtually all organizations, religious or otherwise, must be registered with the Government. A government directive exempts "genuine" religious organizations from registration; however, in practice only registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts; these requirements lead most religious organizations to register. Religious organizations register with the Ministry of Home Affairs with the endorsement of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. The Government provides some utility services, such as electricity, at preferential rates to recognized religious organizations and some economic benefits to the leaders of these groups. Leaders of minority religious groups are also given more freedom to travel than leaders of unrecognized organizations and members of their congregation.

Buddhist doctrine remained part of the state-mandated curriculum in all elementary schools. Students could opt out of instruction in Buddhism, and sometimes did. All students are required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. Some Muslim students are allowed to leave the room during this act, while at some schools non-Buddhists are forced to recite the prayer. The Government continued to fund two state Sangha Universities in Rangoon and Mandalay to train Buddhist monks under the control of the state-sponsored State Monk Coordination Committee ("Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee," or SMNC). The Government also funded one university intended to teach noncitizens about Theravada Buddhism.

Official public holidays include several Theravada Buddhist holy days, as well as some Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holy days.

The Government made some nominal efforts to promote mutual understanding among practitioners of different religions. The Government maintained multireligion monuments in Rangoon and in other major cities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to show preference for Theravada Buddhism while controlling the organization and restricting the activities and expression of the monkhood ("sangha"), although some monks have resisted such control. Based on the 1990 Sangha Organization Law, the Government banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. These nine orders submit to the authority of the SMNC, which is elected indirectly by monks. Violations of this law are punishable by immediate, public defrocking, and often criminal penalties. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners estimated that as of January 2004, there were 300 monks in prison for various offenses.

Most recently, authorities defrocked and arrested a group of 26 monks in December 2003 and sentenced them in February 2004 to jail terms of 7 years (18 years for the leader) for refusing to accept government donations of robes and other items.

In December 2004, the regime hosted a 3-day World Buddhist Summit, despite international criticism and the last-minute withdrawal of the summit's original Japanese sponsors due to security concerns following the October 2004 ousting of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. The summit drew approximately 1,600 attendees from around the world (although mostly from within the country). The Prime Ministers of Thailand and Laos also attended.

State-controlled news media frequently depicted or described government officials paying homage to Buddhist monks; making donations at pagodas throughout the country; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing ostensibly voluntary "people's donations" of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist religious shrines throughout the country. State-owned newspapers routinely featured, as front-page banner slogans, quotations from the Buddhist scriptures. The Government has published books of Buddhist religious instruction. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization in which participation often is not entirely voluntary, has organized courses in Buddhist culture attended by millions of persons, according to state-owned media reports.

The Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana handles the Government's relations with Buddhist monks and Buddhist schools. The government-funded International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Rangoon, which opened in 1998, has as its stated purpose "to share Burma's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world." The main language of instruction is English. There are reports that the ITBMU, while in principle open to the public, accepts only candidates approved by military intelligence officials or recommended by a senior, pro-government abbot.

The junta infiltrated or monitored the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. Religious activities and organizations of all faiths also were subject to broad government restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The Government subjected all media, including religious publications and sermons, to control and censorship.

Authorities have refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Muslim holidays and restricted the number of Muslims that can gather in one place. For instance, Muslim groups reported that authorities selected sites for the annual Eid al-Adha sacrifices and did not allow them to occur in Rangoon. Muslims also reported that the Eid al-Adha ceremonies were restricted to 3 hours. In October 2004, the Government revoked permission at the last moment for the Methodist Church of Lower Burma to hold its 125th anniversary gala event.

In 1995, the Government prohibited any political party member from being ordained. Although this measure remained in effect, it was not strictly enforced.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of minority religions, restricting their educational, proselytizing, and church-building activities.

In June 2005, authorities in Shwepyitha Township, Rangoon Division, arrested eight Muslims, including the imam of the community and charged them for holding group prayers at the imam's house. At the end of the period covered by this report they remained in detention pending trial. Also, a Muslim cleric was arrested in South Dagon for holding private Qur'an courses for Muslim children at his house.

Also in June 2005, authorities forced a Muslim private tutor to close down his school. Although he was teaching only public school curriculum, he was accused of trying to convert children to Islam by offering free courses.

Government authorities continued to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas. Christian groups reported that several times during the period covered by this report, local authorities denied applications for residency permits of known Christian ministers attempting to move into a new township. The groups indicated this was not a widespread practice but depended on the individual community and authority. Despite this, Christian groups reported that church membership was growing, even in strongly Buddhist parts of the country.

In general, the Government has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized all private schools and hospitals, which were extensive and were affiliated mostly with Christian religious organizations. The Government is not known to have paid any compensation in connection with these extensive confiscations. Religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians, have brought in foreign clergy and religious workers as tourists, but they have been careful to ensure that their activities have not been perceived by the Government as proselytizing. Some Christian theological seminaries also continued to operate as did several bible schools and madrassahs. The Government has allowed some foreign religious groups, such as the Mormons, to come to the country to offer humanitarian assistance or English language training to government officials. Some of these groups, not registered with the Myanmar Council of Churches, offered religious services without government interference.

Christian groups continued to experience difficulties in obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions. In some areas, permission to repair existing places of worship was easier to acquire. Muslims reported that they essentially were banned from constructing new mosques anywhere in the country, and they had great difficulty in obtaining permission to repair or expand existing structures. Some authorities reportedly destroy informal houses of worship or unauthorized religious construction they discover. Buddhist groups are not known to have experienced similar difficulties in obtaining permission to build pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls.

In parts of Chin State, authorities reportedly have not authorized the construction of any new churches since 1997, although in many other parts of the state, recently built churches were evident. The Government reportedly also has denied permission for churches to be built on main roads in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. In Rangoon, Mandalay, and elsewhere, authorities have reportedly allowed construction of new buildings by various Christian groups if the groups agreed not to hold services there or put up any Christian signs. One source estimated that the Government approved construction of 20 new churches in 2004.

The Religious Affairs Ministry has argued in the past that permission to construct new religious buildings "depends upon the population of the location." However, there appeared to be no correlation between the construction of pagodas and the demand for additional places of Buddhist worship. In most regions of the country, Christian and Muslim groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations did so with informal approval from local authorities. However, informal approval from local authorities creates a tenuous legal situation. When local authorities or conditions have changed, informal approvals for construction have been rescinded abruptly and construction halted. In some cases, buildings have been torn down, though there were no cases reported during the period covered by this report.

Since the 1960s, Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulties importing religious literature into the country. All publications, religious and secular, remain subject to control and censorship. Translations of the Bible into indigenous languages cannot be imported legally. The Government provides a small fund to recognized Christian and Muslim groups for publishing approved Burmese-language Bibles and Qur'ans. Additionally, officials have occasionally allowed local printing of limited copies of other religious material (with notation that they were for internal use only) in indigenous languages without prior approval by government censors.

During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of the confiscation of Bibles, Qur'ans, or other religious materials. In 2003, authorities in Rangoon reportedly seized a shipment of Qur'ans illegally imported from Bangladesh. In 2002, the German-based company Good Books for All was allowed to distribute 10,000 Bibles in the country. Bibles and Qur'ans continued to be smuggled into the country.

State censorship authorities continued to enforce special restrictions on the local publication of the Bible, the Qur'an, and Christian and Muslim publications in general. The most onerous restriction was a list of over 100 prohibited words that the censors would not allow in Christian or Islamic literature because they are indigenous or Pali language terms long used in Buddhist literature. Many of these words have been used and accepted by some of the country's Christian and Muslim groups since the colonial period. Organizations that translate and publish non-Buddhist religious texts were appealing these restrictions. In addition, according to other reports, the censors have objected to passages of the Old Testament and the Qur'an that they believe approve the use of violence against nonbelievers. There have been no reports of arrests or prosecutions for possession of any traditional religious literature in recent years.

The Government allowed members of all religious groups to establish and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries and to travel abroad for religious purposes, subject to restrictive passport and visa issuance practices, foreign exchange controls, and government monitoring that extended to all international activities by all citizens regardless of religion. The Government sometimes expedited its burdensome passport issuance procedures for Muslims making the Hajj or Buddhists going on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, India, although it limited the number of pilgrims. During the period covered by this report, immigration and passport office officials continued to use the occasion of the Hajj to extort bribes from would-be travelers.

Religious affiliation is indicated on government-issued identification cards that citizens and permanent residents of the country are required to carry at all times. Having "Muslim" on the cards often led to harassment by police or immigration authorities. Citizens also were required to indicate their religion on some official application forms such as passports.

Non-Buddhists continued to experience employment discrimination at upper levels of the public sector. During the period covered by this report, the most senior non-Buddhist serving in the Government was the Deputy Attorney General, who was a Baptist. There were no non-Buddhists who held flag rank in the armed forces. There were no non-Buddhist members of the Central Executive Committee of the largest opposition group--the National League for Democracy--although the party remained popular among persons of all religions in the country. The Government discouraged Muslims from entering military service, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired a promotion beyond middle ranks were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism.

Muslims in Arakan State, on the western coast, and particularly those of the Rohingya minority group, continued to experience particularly severe legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination. The Government denied citizenship status to Rohingyans on the grounds that their ancestors allegedly did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, as required by the country's citizenship law. Although essentially treated as foreigners, Rohingya Muslims are not issued Foreigner Registration Cards (FRCs). Instead the Government gives them "Temporary Registration Cards," which give them status preferential to a foreign resident. Non-Rohingya Muslims also are not considered citizens by the authorities. In order for these Muslims to get National Registration Cards and passports, they must pay large bribes. Ethnic Burman Muslims pay less than ethnic minority Muslims.

Since 1988, the Government has permitted only three marriages per year per village in the primarily Rohingya townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung in northern Arakan State. During the period covered by this report, the Government extended this edict to the central Arakan townships of Kyauk Pyu and Ramree Townships in central Arakan State. Following the ouster of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004 and the demise of military intelligence, marriage restrictions were temporarily lifted but reportedly reinstated in 2005.

Muslims across the country, as well as ethnic minority groups such as Chinese and Indian, are required to obtain permission from the township authorities whenever they wish to leave their hometown. Authorities generally do not grant permission to Rohingya or Muslim Arakanese to travel from their hometowns for any purpose. However, permission sometimes can be obtained through bribery. Non-Arakanese Muslims are given more freedom to travel; however, they must also seek permission,

which is usually granted after a bribe is paid.

The Government reserves secondary education for citizens only; Rohingyans do not have access to state-run schools beyond primary education and are unable to obtain most civil service positions.

There have been no specific anti-Semitic activities by the Government. There are no apparent anti-Semitic private groups. One Christian minister, Reverend Kyi Win, circulated around Rangoon an English-language anti-Semitic diatribe. However, there was no evidence that this person had government backing or represented the views of any of the country's mainstream Christian groups.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Military forces have killed religious figures on some occasions. In 2002, troops killed 10 ethnic Karen, including a pastor, a day after being ambushed by fighters from a Karen resistance group. However, during the period covered by this report, there were no reports of such killings.

Local civilian and military authorities continued to take actions against Christian groups: arresting clergy, closing home churches, and prohibiting religious services. During the period covered by this report, authorities in the Rangoon area closed several house churches because they did not have proper authorization to hold religious meetings. Other Rangoon home churches remained operational only after paying bribes to local officials. At the same time, the authorities made it difficult, although not impossible, to obtain approval for the construction of "authorized" churches. In September 2004, a court sentenced an ethnic Chin evangelist to a month in prison for interfering with local authorities' efforts to shut his home church in Rangoon. Evangelists in South Dagon and Hlaing Thayar townships near Rangoon were accused of proselytizing and were threatened in 2002 and 2003 with arrest if they opened house churches and kindergartens.

In early 2005, local authorities in the Chin State capital of Haka notified Baptist leaders that they would be forced to relocate an active, historic cemetery from church property to a remote location outside of town.

During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of authorities destroying mosques or of Muslims constructing new mosques. It remained difficult to get permission to repair existing mosques, although internal renovations were reportedly allowed. In October 2004, local authorities confiscated a Muslim cemetery in Myeik Township, Tanintharyi Division, and closed the adjacent mosque. Three Muslims were reportedly imprisoned for a month for violating this closure order. In November 2004, authorities in three suburbs of Rangoon ordered the closure of informal "religious community houses" used by local Muslims in lieu of mosques (which have not been built in these townships). After Muslim leaders in Rangoon complained, community houses in two of the three suburbs were allowed to re-open.

In 2002, local authorities in Arakan State scheduled approximately 40 mosques and religious community houses for destruction, including some in the state capital Sittwe, because they were reportedly built without permission. At that time, religious leaders in Rangoon Division and Karen State made other such allegations. Thirteen mosques were destroyed in Arakan before the authorities desisted at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Government subsequently gave written permission to repair existing mosques in some areas. However, to ensure that destroyed mosques were not rebuilt, they were replaced with government-owned buildings, monasteries, and Buddhist temples.

Authorities have attempted to prevent Chin Christians from practicing their religion. In January 2005, the military commander in Matupi Township, Chin State, ordered the destruction of a 30-foot cross, raised on a hillside with government permission in 1999. Reportedly a more senior military official subsequently told local church authorities that they could get permission to reconstruct the cross. However, the local pastors have thus far refused to ask for such authorization. In the past, these crosses often have been replaced with pagodas, sometimes built with forced labor.

In the past, SPDC authorities have made efforts to "dilute" ethnic minority populations by encouraging, or even forcing, Buddhist Burmans to relocate. Certain townships in the Arakan State, such as Thandwe, Gwa, and Taung-gut, were declared "Muslim-free zones" by government decree in 1983. There are still original-resident Muslims living in Thandwe, but new Muslims are not allowed to buy property or reside in the township. Muslims no longer are permitted to live in Gwa and Taung-gut.

During the period covered by this report, there were several reports of small clashes in Rangoon and Arakan State between Muslims and Buddhist monks, particularly during or just prior to the Muslim Eid holidays. The most serious of these occurred in Kyauk Pyu, Arakan State, in January 2005. During several days of violence, two Muslims were killed and one Buddhist monk was severely injured. Some Muslim groups blamed the Government for trying to increase tensions between Buddhists and Muslims as part of a "divide and rule" strategy. Reportedly in May 2004, local Buddhist villagers in Kyun Su Township, Tanintharyi Division, attacked and destroyed the properties of 14 Muslim families. Despite a complaint from Muslim leaders, the Government had not taken any action by the end of the period covered by this report.

In 2003, there were several violent incidents involving Muslims and Buddhists. In June 2003, there were unverified reports of incitement of anti-Muslim violence by USDA members in Irrawaddy Division. In November 2003, troops reportedly fired on monks protesting the arrest of a local abbot and killed two of them. Authorities have not investigated the incidents.

In both Kyaukse and Rangoon, witnesses claimed that many Buddhist attackers systematically were transported into and out of the Muslim areas. Others claimed to see monks carrying pistols and walkie-talkies under their robes. Muslim leaders insisted that Buddhist-Muslim relations in Rangoon and elsewhere were harmonious, suggesting only provocateurs could spark this kind of violence. While the specifics of how these attacks began and who carried them out have not been documented fully, it appears that the Government was, at best, slow to protect Muslims and their property from destruction. The violence significantly heightened tensions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities.

In the aftermath of these 2003 attacks, the authorities paid some compensation to the affected Muslims and gave permission to the Kyaukse Muslims to rebuild the two mosques destroyed in the violence. The reconstruction had not occurred because most Muslims had not returned to their previous neighborhoods. In addition, the Government arrested and defrocked 44 monks and 26 other Buddhists suspected of participation in the Kyaukse and Rangoon violence and imposed a 7 p.m. curfew on all monasteries. The curfew was subsequently limited to between 9 p.m. and 4 a.m., although it was applied countrywide. There were unverified reports that one senior monk received a death sentence; it was not known what sentences the other monks received. These measures caused some tension between the Government and the usually favored Buddhist monkhood, leading to some localized demonstrations inside Rangoon monasteries. Seventy Muslims were arrested and 31 Kyaukse Muslims were sentenced in December 2003 (1 received the death penalty) for their involvement in the violence, including the alleged murder of a senior Buddhist monk. Muslim leaders called the trials a mockery of justice, but they did not address the veracity of the charges.

Many of the roughly 20,000 Rohingya Muslims remaining in refugee camps in Bangladesh have refused to return because they fear human rights abuses, including religious persecution.

The Government continued to prevent Buddhist monks, along with all other segments of society, from calling for democracy and political dialogue with pro-democracy forces. During the period covered by this report, government efforts to control these monks included travel restrictions (notably an overnight curfew for monasteries) forbidding pro-democracy monks from delivering sermons, and a prohibition on certain monasteries from receiving political party members as overnight guests, although monasteries regularly do by calling the party members "honored donors."

There were no known arrests of Buddhist monks or nuns during the period covered by this report. Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) estimated that as of January 2004, there were 300 Buddhist monks in prison for various offenses. The number of non-Buddhist religious figures in prison or those imprisoned for their religious beliefs was unknown. The AAPP estimate could not be verified nor could a complete listing of those imprisoned be obtained. Monks serving sentences of life in prison reportedly included the Venerable U Thondara of Myingyan (arrested during the 1988 anti-government demonstrations).

Muslim leaders reported that military intelligence officials arrested several Muslim religious teachers in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State, in September 2004 following a fatwa issued against individuals who had allegedly raped a Muslim girl. One of the teachers reportedly was tortured to death in detention. The others were subsequently released.

There continued to be credible reports from diverse regions of the country that government officials compelled persons, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, especially in rural areas, to contribute money, food, or materials to state-sponsored projects to build, renovate, or maintain Buddhist religious shrines or monuments. The Government denied that it used coercion and called these contributions "voluntary donations" consistent with Buddhist ideas of merit making. Unlike in previous years, during the period covered by this report, there were no reports that Muslims or Christians were compelled to build Buddhist pagodas.

In the past, pagodas or government buildings often have been built on confiscated Muslim land. In 2003, authorities in Kyun Su Township, Tanintharyi Division, seized Muslim religious land on which they planned to build a pagoda. Despite complaints by Muslim leaders to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the regional military commander, the Government had taken no action in this case by the end of the period covered by this report.

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), has been in prison or house arrest since forces allied with the Government attacked her and her convoy, which included several NLD-allied monks, while traveling in Sagaing Division in the northwestern region of the country in 2003. The Government reportedly used criminals dressed in monks' robes in the ambush.

Forced Religious Conversion

Muslim and Christian community leaders reported that during the period covered by this report, authorities had moved away from a campaign of forced conversion to Buddhism and instead focused on enticing non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism using charitable activities or outright bribery. Conversion of non-Buddhists, coerced or otherwise, is part of a longstanding Government campaign to "Burmanize" ethnic minority regions. This campaign has coincided, in Chin State in particular, with increased military presence. In October 2004, in northwestern Shan State, a local government-backed abbot reportedly pressured local Christians to convert to Buddhism, using threats or bribery. Also during the period, there was a single, unverified report of forced conversions at gunpoint in Chin State. However, Christian groups reported these types of violent cases were less frequent than 2 or 3 years ago.

While in the past, there were credible reports that hundreds of Christian tribal Nagas in the country had been converted forcibly

to Buddhism by the country's military, reliable sources indicate that this sort of activity has not occurred in recent years.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorists

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There are social tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities. Preferential treatment, in hiring and in other areas--for non-Buddhists during British colonial rule, and for Buddhists since independence--is a key source of these tensions. There is widespread prejudice against ethnic Indians, particularly ethnic Bengalis, many of whom are Muslims.

Since 1994, when the pro-government Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) was organized, there has been armed conflict between the DKBA and the predominately Christian anti-government Karen National Union (KNU). Although the DKBA reportedly includes some Christians and there are many Buddhists in the KNU, the armed conflict between the two Karen groups has had strong religious overtones. In August 2004, according to a reliable report, DKBA authorities forced villagers near Hpa'An, Karen State to provide "volunteer" labor and money to build Buddhist pagodas. Despite a complaint by the local pastor, senior government authorities refused to take any action. There were also unverified reports that DKBA authorities expelled villagers who converted to Christianity. In 2003, there was an unverified report that local DKBA commanders forced the local "sangha" council to order the demolition of six monasteries in Myawaddy whose abbots had been critical of the DKBA.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Government restrictions on speech, press, assembly, and movement, including diplomatic travel, make it difficult to obtain timely and accurate information on human rights in the country, including freedom of religion. Information about abuses often becomes available only months or years after the events and frequently is difficult or impossible to verify. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, while criticizing the U.S. Government in September 2004 for its "lack of basic knowledge and misperceptions regarding the situation and concept of religions" in the country, formally declined to meet with U.S. Embassy officials to discuss the content of the previous year's report.

The Embassy continued to promote religious freedom in its contacts with all facets of society. During the period covered by this report, Embassy officials discussed the importance of improved religious freedom with government and military officials, private citizens, scholars, representatives of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives met regularly with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious groups, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religious-affiliated organizations and NGOs. The Embassy focused on the importance of religious tolerance by hosting interfaith workshops and discussions with visiting speakers and by translating and subtitled a videotape on religious diversity in the United States. The Ambassador hosted regular receptions for senior members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim organizations.

Through outreach and traveling as much as permitted by the Government, Embassy representatives offered support to local NGOs and religious leaders and acted as a conduit for information exchange with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Representatives of the Rohingya minority participated in English language and current events studies at the Embassy's American Center.

Since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Because of the country's poor human rights situation, including its abuses of religious freedom, the United States imposes extensive sanctions on the regime. These sanctions include a ban on imports from the country, a ban on the export of financial services to the country, a ban on bilateral aid to the Government, a ban on the export of arms to the country, and a suspension of the generalized system of preference benefits and Export Import Bank financial services in support of U.S. exports to the country. The U.S. Government also suspended all Overseas Private Investment Corporation financial services in support of U.S. investment in the country, ended active promotion of trade with the country, controlled issuance of visas to high-ranking government and military officials and their immediate family members, and froze SPDC assets in the United States. It also has opposed all assistance to the Government by international financial institutions and urged the governments of other countries to take similar actions. New investment in the country by U.S. citizens has been illegal since May 1997.

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